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Keeping the Spiritan Heritage Alive

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KEEPING THE SPIRITAN HERITAGE ALIVE

Guy Tapin

A native of Canada and an optician by profession, Guy Tapin holds diplomas in Theology and in Social Science. Guy has been involved with the Spiritans for over 30 years and with the In'Afu Center, of which he is the current director, since 1989. He and his wife, France, are also very engaged with the Catholic Diocese of Montreal, and are recipients of the *mérite diocésain Ignace-Bourget* medal in recognition of their outstanding contribution. They have three children.

(Translation: J. Fogarty, C.S.Sp.)

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AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH IN QUEBEC

IN'AFU CENTER

In a typically Spiritan attempt to respond to the signs of the times, the In'Afu Center¹ was founded in Quebec in 1972. It was a collaborative project between the members of the Canadian Province of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Spirit² (Spiritans Sisters). The Center, located at St-Esprit de Montcalm some 50 km from Montreal, aimed at assuring a Spiritan presence among the youth of Quebec. It sought to offer a unique place of welcome where they could deepen their Christian values and share their questions and concerns. In a climate of mutual acceptance and respect, several programs were developed in response to the needs articulated by the young people who participated – sessions on self-discovery, human relationships, Christian commitment, social justice, vocational discernment, engagement and marriage. From the outset, the response was positive and encouraging; many young people of secondary school age eagerly gave up their weekends to participate in these programs and returned with enthusiasm for follow-up sessions.

PROSPECT OF CLOSURE

In 1994, diminishing resources in personnel and finance led both of the founding congregations to question their continued involvement in the Center. The closure of the Center and the sale of the property appeared inevitable. Many other religious congregations around Quebec had withdrawn from active presence in the community in similar circumstances and it seemed that the Spiritans had no real choice but to do likewise. Fortunately, lay collaboration had been a feature of the In'Afu approach from the beginning; it was now to be the key factor in its survival. A small group of lay people who had been actively involved in the Center for some years, and who were passionately convinced of its importance for the Christian formation of the youth of Quebec, succeeded in getting both congregations to reconsider what seemed an inevitable conclusion. They saw themselves as carriers of a unique Spiritan tradition that had colored and shaped their own lives and the lives of many young people who had participated in the Center's sessions over the years; it simply could not be allowed to die.

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A NEW VISION

In the discussions that followed, a new vision was born. The Center would be handed over to a group of lay people who would form a new corporation; the two founding congregations would continue to accompany the corporation for a number of years, on the understanding that it would eventually be responsible for its own future. It was an act of confidence in the future and in the ability of lay people to keep the Spiritan heritage alive.

The question, of course, was how a group of lay people who were not professed religious could express and live the Spiritan charism. The corporation faced this challenge of interpreting and adapting the charism with creative enthusiasm. In the first place, they saw their baptismal commitment as central, God's call to work for a world of justice and equality where the poor have a privileged place, as seen so clearly by Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann. They believed that the witness of evangelical community was at the heart of this call as a counter-cultural challenge to the individualism, neoliberalism, and consumerism of our age. Would it be possible to integrate the fundamental values that underpin the three vows of religion? Poverty could be lived in terms of simplicity of lifestyle and voluntary sharing; chastity in terms of fidelity, a lifelong commitment, whether single or married, to the other; obedience in the form of authenticity, both personal and communal. They would form a community comprising religious and lay people, celibates and married couples, with the aim of influencing the wider community by their actions and their way of life and placing themselves, in the spirit of Francis Libermann, at the service of those deprived of their human dignity. Initially, neither the professed Spiritans nor their lay collaborators were prepared for such a venture. There was a sense of a new Pentecost with both groups gathered together in the upper room, entrusted by Christ with a mission to continue his work in the spirit of the founders, but fearful of moving forward and not quite sure as to how to proceed.

THREE SMALL COMMUNITIES

Today, the In'AFu Center is blessed to have three small communities, accompanied by Spiritans, in the regions of Montreal, Joliette, and Longueuil. All of the members are committed to working for a world of equality and justice, and to inviting their fellow citizens to participate in efforts to change systems, laws, and behaviors that create injustice, exclusion, and the loss of human dignity. This understanding of our mission comes directly from the Spiritan vision we have inherited and

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with which we believe we have been entrusted. Some of our members are privileged to work directly with the young people in the Center itself. The elimination in 2000 of all religious instruction in public schools has led to unprecedented spiritual poverty among the young people of Quebec. In the multicultural society in which they live today, young Quebecois have increasing difficulty in sharing their spiritual values for the simple reason that these have virtually disappeared. They live side by side with young Moslems, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs, and members of other religious traditions, all of whom have at least a minimum of knowledge of their religion transmitted by their family and religious institution. In 2007, the Center welcomed almost 2000 young people, the majority in the 14 to 16 age bracket, who came to reflect on their lives and their future. Sessions on preparation for first communion and confirmation, which have been introduced into the In'Afu programs of more recent years, offer an opportunity to deepen their knowledge of the Christian tradition and Catholic faith in a family setting. As always, we believe that the witness of our own personal and community lives, as well as the creation of a respectful and welcoming environment, are of paramount importance.

AN ONGOING CHALLENGE

After some twelve years of constant struggle to be faithful to our original intuitions, we believe that our efforts are beginning to bear fruit. Evangelical communities in the Spiritan tradition are beginning to take concrete shape but there is still a long way to go. To describe adequately the journey that has brought us to where we are today would require a much longer article. But the above outline should suffice to illustrate the beauty, the originality, and the innovative nature of the path we have taken. We still need the support, the prayers, and the advice of the wider faith community in which we live. As Francis Libermann stressed, we have to be continually attentive so that people see what is happening in our midst as the work of God and not merely the fruit of human endeavor.

Footnotes

¹ The word "In'Afu" comes from the Igala language in Nigeria and means "breath."

² The Missionary Sisters of the Holy Spirit were founded by Eugénie Caps, a young woman from Lorraine, France, in 1921. Today they work in several countries in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the French Antilles. Their spirituality is essentially that of Fr. Francis Libermann.